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Astrid Lindgren  
Rasmus *and*  
*the* Vagabond



RASMUS AND THE VAGABOND


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Astrid Lindgren

# **Rasmus** *and the* **Vagabond**

*Translated by Gerry Bothmer / Illustrated by Eric Palmquist*

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## Contents

<b>1. The Lucky Day</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Disappointment</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3. It's All Over Now</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>4. Paradise Oscar</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>5. A Day on the Road</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>6. Hard Times</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>7. Rasmus Investigates</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>8. A Pair of Light Tan Shoes</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>9. The Hiding Place</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>10. The Chase</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>11. Caught!</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>12. The Rescue</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>13. A Dream Come True</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>14. Homecoming</b>	<b>162</b>



## CHAPTER 1

# The Lucky Day

**R**asmus was sitting in his regular notch in the linden tree, thinking about things that shouldn't be allowed to exist. Potatoes were at the top of the list. Cooked, with gravy on them for Sunday dinner, they were all right, but when they kept on sprouting in the field and had to be dug up—then they shouldn't be tolerated. He could also easily

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do without Miss Hawk, for it was she who was always saying, "Tomorrow we're going to spend the day digging up potatoes."

"We" she said, but of course that didn't include her. It was Rasmus and Gunnar and Big Peter and the other boys who had to slave in the potato field the whole hot summer day. To top it off, they had to watch the village kids troop by on their way to the swimming place down at the river! Snooty village kids – they shouldn't be allowed around either.

Rasmus was trying to think whether there was anything else he could put on his list to be done away with, but a hiss from below interrupted his deliberations.

"Rasmus! Hide! The Hawk is coming!"

Gunnar had popped his head out of the woodshed door, and Rasmus moved fast. He slipped away from his perch in the tree, and when Miss Hawk a second later stood outside the woodshed, there was no Rasmus to be seen in the green branches of the linden. This was lucky for Rasmus because Miss Hawk strongly disapproved of boys flitting about in trees like birds when there was useful work to be done.

"Gunnar, I hope you're only cutting the spruce wood?" Miss Hawk's steely eyes scrutinized the wood which Gunnar had gathered in the sack.

"Yes, Miss Hawk," said Gunnar in the tone of voice he was supposed to use when he answered Miss Hawk. It was the special orphanage voice they had to use when talking to the directress, or to the parson when he came on an inspection visit and asked them if they didn't think it was fun to work in the garden, or when one of the village children's parents came to complain that their boy had been beaten up for

shouting “orphan” in the schoolyard. Then the orphanage children had to put all the gentleness and obedience they could muster into their voices, because that is what was expected by Miss Hawk and the parson and everybody.

“Do you know where Rasmus is?” said Miss Hawk.

Alarmed, Rasmus pressed himself still closer to the branch from which he was dangling and prayed that Miss Hawk would go away. He couldn’t keep hanging on like this much longer. His arms were starting to ache. They would gradually give and he would sink down right in front of Miss Hawk. The blue-and-white-striped orphanage shirt he was wearing didn’t help any either. The birds in the trees were so hard to spot because God had given them protective coloring, the teacher had said. But God hadn’t provided orphan boys with protective coloring, and therefore Rasmus begged God with all his heart to send Miss Hawk away before he dropped.

It wasn’t long since Miss Hawk had scolded him because he got himself dirtier than anyone else in the orphanage. But just wait! The next time she said anything like that he would just say that he was working on his protective coloring. But he would say it to himself, of course. You didn’t say such things so that the Hawk heard them, because her eyes were so steely and her mouth was so hard, and sometimes the wrinkles in her forehead were so severe. Gunnar claimed that even her nose was severe, but Rasmus didn’t agree. In fact, he thought that the Hawk had quite a nice nose – although hanging in the tree in this agonizing position, his arms going to sleep, he could hardly think of anything nice about the Hawk.



Gunnar was trembling as he kept piling wood into the sack while Miss Hawk stood by watching. He didn't even dare raise his eyes as high as her nose. All he saw of her was a bit of her stiffly starched apron.

"Do you know where Rasmus is?" Miss Hawk repeated impatiently, since she hadn't received an answer to her first question.

"I saw him a while ago over by the chicken coop," said Gunnar. That was the honest-to-goodness truth. Half an hour ago, Gunnar and Rasmus had been looking for eggs in the nettles behind the chicken coop, where the silly hens would sometimes sneak off to lay their eggs. So Gunnar *had* seen Rasmus there. But his present whereabouts Gunnar thought it would be better if Miss Hawk didn't know.

"If you see him, tell him that he has to pull up a basketful of nettles," said Miss Hawk, abruptly turning on her heels and leaving.

"Yes, Miss Hawk," said Gunnar.

"Did you hear that?" he said when Rasmus came climbing down from the linden tree. "You're to pull up a basketful of nettles."

Nettles shouldn't be allowed to exist either, Rasmus thought. All summer the boys had to pick nettles for the hens, who ate them boiled every day.

"Can't those stupid hens eat the nettles when they grow right under their beaks?"

"Of course they can't," said Gunnar. "They have to be served properly, if you please."

He made a deep bow to a hen who came strutting idly along, cackling.



Rasmus wasn't sure whether hens should be wiped out or not, but he finally decided in favor of letting them live. Without hens there wouldn't be eggs for Sunday breakfast, and without eggs on Sunday it would be hard to tell what day it was. Since hens had to be, he might as well get to work and pull up those nettles.

Rasmus wasn't any lazier than any other nine-year-old. He just had a natural dislike of everything which kept him from climbing trees or swimming in the river or playing robbers with the other boys and lying in ambush behind the potato cellar when the girls would come to fetch potatoes. This was his idea of time well spent.

But it wasn't Miss Hawk's, and that was quite natural. Vaesterhaga Orphanage was a municipal institution which

got part of its income by selling eggs and vegetables. The children were a cheap and necessary labor force, and Miss Hawk didn't put any inhuman demands on them, even if Rasmus considered it inhuman to make them dig up potatoes all day. But since he and the other orphans would have to support themselves when they reached the age of thirteen, it was necessary for them to learn to work. This was Miss Hawk's understanding, but unfortunately she did not understand how necessary it was for children even in an orphanage to play. But perhaps this was too much to expect, since she herself had never been very fond of playing.

Rasmus was obediently pulling up nettles behind the chicken coop, but as he worked he told the chickens what he thought of them.

"Lazy critters like you shouldn't be allowed. Nettles are growing around here like crazy, but no, that won't do. I have to work like a slave and pull them up for you."

The more he thought about it, the more he began to feel like a slave, and it was quite fun. Last term his teacher had read them a book about slavery in America. a long time ago. He liked nothing better than to have the teacher read to them, and the book about slavery was the most exciting story Rasmus had ever heard.

He groaned as he pulled up the nettles because now he could feel the slave driver's whip on him, and there were bloodhounds behind the ice house ready to attack him if he didn't fill the basket fast enough. It was American cotton he was picking now, not Swedish nettles. The big mitten he was wearing in order not to get a nettle burn was not exactly what

one would expect a slave to be wearing under the burning southern sun, but he just couldn't do without it.

Rasmus tugged and pulled. But sometimes even slaves have nice things happen to them. Several enormous nettles were growing over by the ice house, and though by now Rasmus had his basket full, he went over and ripped them out just the same to tease the bloodhounds. Then, all of a sudden, his eye caught something lying in the sawdust next to the ice house. It was partly covered with sawdust but it looked quite a lot like a coin. Rasmus' heart beat faster. It couldn't be real money – such things didn't happen! But just the same he pulled off his mitten and stretched out his hand to grab it. It was a five-cent piece! The cotton fields vanished, the bloodhounds too, and the poor slave stood there dizzy, his head spinning with elation.

It seemed to Rasmus that five cents would buy just about anything he wanted – a big bag of candy or five pieces of toffee or a chocolate bar. Perhaps he could run down to the village candy store during lunch hour tomorrow. Or else he could hold on to the money in the happy thought that he was rich and could buy anything he wanted.

Now chickens should definitely be allowed, and nettles too, because without chickens and nettles this would never have happened. He was sorry that he had been so unfriendly to the poor chickens a while ago. Judging by the way they were strutting around in the chicken coop, their feelings didn't seem to have been hurt too much. But he still wanted them to know that he didn't have anything against them.

“You certainly should be allowed to exist,” he said as he walked over to the chicken coop. “I’m going to pull up nettles for you every day.”

Then a new miracle happened. He saw another treasure! A sea shell was lying at the feet of a cackling leghorn hen. Right in the middle of all the chicken dirt lay a beautiful white shell with small brown spots.

“Oh,” said Rasmus. “Oh!”

He quickly unhooked the gate to the chicken coop and without paying the slightest attention to the wild scurrying in every direction, he rushed in and grabbed the shell.

His delight was so great that he felt unable to bear it alone. He just had to tell Gunnar all about it – poor Gunnar, who had been with him at the chicken coop only an hour ago and hadn’t found a shell or a five-cent piece! Rasmus became thoughtful. Perhaps neither the shell nor the coin had been there an hour ago. Perhaps they had got there by some sort of magic just when he began pulling up nettles. Maybe this was to be his lucky day when only fantastic things happened. He’d better ask Gunnar what he thought about it.

Rasmus started to run but suddenly stopped when he remembered the basket of nettles. He went back to the ice house to pick it up and, with the basket in one hand and the coin held tightly in the other, he ran to look for Gunnar.

He found him over at the playground where the children gathered when their work was over for the day. The whole group was together and everyone seemed tense and anxious. Something must have happened while Rasmus was away.

Rasmus was eager to get Gunnar off by himself and show him his treasures, but Gunnar had more important things to talk about.

“We’re not going to dig up potatoes tomorrow,” he informed Rasmus. “Some people are coming tomorrow to pick out a kid.”

In the face of this news, the coin and the shell faded into the background. Nothing could be as important as the possibility that someone in the group would get a home of his own. There wasn’t a child at Vaesterhaga who wasn’t dreaming of that. Even the bigger boys and girls who would soon be ready to go out on their own hoped against all reason for such a miracle. Even the ugliest and most impossible of them wouldn’t stop hoping that some day someone would come who, for some strange, wonderful, unexplainable reason, wanted just him or her, not as a servant to order around, but as their own child. To have parents was the greatest joy the children at the orphanage could imagine. Not all of them would admit their hopeless longing openly. But Rasmus was only nine and too young to hide his heart.

“Just think,” he said eagerly, “if they should pick me! Oh how I wish that they would want me.”

“Bah! Don’t get any ideas,” said Gunnar. “They always pick girls with curly hair.”

Rasmus’ spirits sank and an expression of black despair spread over his face. He looked pleadingly at Gunnar. “Don’t you think there might be a chance that someone would want a boy with straight hair?”

“They want girls with curly hair, I told you.”

Gunnar was an unusually homely boy with a pug nose and hair as coarse as a goat's. He kept his dreams and hopes of having a father and mother a deep secret. No one would ever have guessed that he cared in the least who would be chosen tomorrow.

Later, lying in his narrow bed beside Gunnar's in the boys' dormitory, Rasmus remembered that he still hadn't told him about the shell and the coin. He leaned over and whispered, "Gunnar, listen, so many strange things have happened today."

"What sort of strange things?" asked Gunnar.

"I found a five-cent piece and a beautiful shell, but don't tell anybody."

"Let me see," whispered Gunnar, who was now curious. "Come, let's go over to the window so I can see."

They tiptoed over to the window in their nightshirts, and in the clear light of the summer twilight Rasmus showed off his treasures, carefully so that no one could see.

"How lucky you are," said Gunnar, running his index finger over the smooth shell.

"Yes, I'm lucky. And because I am, the people who are coming tomorrow might want me."

"Listen to him!" scoffed Gunnar.

Big Peter, the oldest of the boys at the orphanage and self-appointed leader, was in the bed next to the door. He had raised himself on his elbow and was listening tensely.

"Get into bed," he whispered. "The Hawk is coming. I hear her clomping up the stairs."

Gunnar and Rasmus made a dash for their beds, their nightshirts flapping around their bare legs, and when the Hawk came into the dormitory you could have heard a pin drop.

The directress was making her nightly rounds, going from bed to bed to make sure everybody was settled down. Very rarely she would give one of the boys a reluctant pat on the head as she came by. Rasmus didn't like the Hawk, but every night he wished that she would stroke him – he didn't know why.

If she comes by and strokes me tonight, thought Rasmus as he lay there, it means that I'll have luck tomorrow too. It will mean that the people who are coming will want me, even though my hair is straight.

Now Miss Hawk was close to Gunnar's bed. Rasmus lay stiff with suspense. Now . . . now she would be coming to him.

"Rasmus, don't lie there picking holes in the blanket," was all she said.

Then she continued her inspection and in the next minute she had closed the door behind her, calmly, firmly, sternly. All was quiet in the dormitory, but from Rasmus came a deep sigh.



## CHAPTER 2

# Disappointment

**L**ots of soap was used in the boys' washroom the next morning. Clean ears and scrubbed hands were the first things foster parents looked for, if you could believe the Hawk, and today everyone was anxious to put his best foot forward.

Rasmus grabbed a big piece of soap and started to scrub himself more thoroughly than he had since the day before Christmas Eve. He was a boy, and he did have straight hair – that couldn't be changed. But if it was only a question of the ears, he would show up with the cleanest ears in all of Vaesterhaga, and no one's hands would be redder from scrubbing than his. The girls had an advantage there too, for they were unnaturally clean. It seemed that dirt didn't stick to them in the same way that it did to boys. And besides, they were always doing dishes, scrubbing floors and baking and things like that, so they got clean without trying.

Big Peter was standing in the middle of the floor. He still hadn't touched his soap or his brush. He was going to be thirteen in the fall and he would have to leave Vaesterhaga whether he wanted to or not. He knew that he would have to

start working as a farmhand for some farmer in the vicinity, and he also knew that, no matter how thoroughly he washed his ears, nothing could change that.

“I’m not going to wash today,” he announced in a loud voice.

There was a sudden pause in the scrubbing at the basins. Big Peter was the leader and he wasn’t going to wash. Now the problem was to decide what the rest of them were going to do.

“I’m not going to wash either,” said Gunnar, putting his brush down with a bang. He was also aware that soap and water couldn’t accomplish any miracles as far as his looks were concerned.

“Have you gone crazy?” asked Rasmus, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes. “You know who is coming.”

“You seem to think that it’s old King Oscar come back to life,” said Gunnar. “I don’t care whether it’s the king or a junk dealer from Kisa. I’m not going to wash, that’s all.”

Aunt Olga, the cook, who was more talkative than Miss Hawk, had said that the man who was coming was a rich grocer, which was certainly far from being a junk dealer. He was bringing his wife along. They didn’t have any children of their own to inherit the business one day, and that is why they were coming to Vaesterhaga. To inherit a whole business – that would be something, thought Rasmus. Just imagine having a store filled with all kinds of candy! Of course they probably had things like flour and coffee and soap and herring, too.

“Anyway, I’m going to wash,” he said with determination, and started to scrub his elbows.

“You just keep on scrubbing,” said Gunnar. “I’ll help you.” He grabbed Rasmus by the neck and quickly dunked his head in the basin. Rasmus came up, spluttering and furious, while Gunnar stood laughing with his friendly pug-nosed face.

“You aren’t mad, I hope,” he said teasingly.

Then Rasmus laughed too. He never could stay angry at Gunnar for very long. But he intended to give him a good soaking anyway. He picked up the basin and stalked threateningly toward Gunnar, who stood in front of the dormitory door, awaiting his attack. Rasmus raised the basin. Now Gunnar was really going to get it. But just as he aimed, his target quickly jumped to one side. At the same instant the door opened, and like a violent tropical torrent the contents of the basin splashed over the person standing in the doorway.



That person was Miss Hawk. When such a thing happens, the only one who can keep from laughing is the one who gets drenched. Miss Hawk was far from laughing. But from the boys came muffled giggles, and from Rasmus a shrill, terrified laugh. It lasted for only an instant and then he stood, struck dumb with horror, waiting for the catastrophe. Because there would be one, of that he was sure.

Miss Hawk was a person with a great deal of self-control, which she used now. All she did was shake herself like a wet dog and fix a pair of steely eyes on Rasmus. "I don't have time for you now," she said. "But I'll see you later."

Then she clapped her hands and cried, "You are all to gather in the yard in half an hour. By that time you will have made the beds, cleaned the dormitory, and had breakfast." Then she left without even glancing at Rasmus. When she had disappeared, bedlam broke out.

"Gosh, what a soaking she got!" said Big Peter. "That time you hit the bull's eye, Rasmus."

But Rasmus couldn't share the general enthusiasm over his aim. This day certainly wasn't beginning very well. It didn't look as if this day were going to mark the turning point in his life, when he would get parents of his own. Punishment was what he was in for, probably terrible punishment, since what he had done was so terrible. He shivered, and his whole body was shaking.

"Get dressed," said Gunnar. "You're so cold you're turning blue in the face." He added in a subdued voice, "It was all my fault that you threw water on the Hawk."

Still shivering, Rasmus got his shirt and pants on. It didn't make any difference whose fault it was. Neither of them had

dreamed that their pranks would have such dreadful consequences. But he was afraid, terribly afraid, of what the Hawk would think up as punishment for him. If any of them did anything really bad, Miss Hawk would beat him with a cane. Big Peter had been thrashed once when he had stolen apples from the parson's garden, and Elof had also got a beating the morning he flew into a rage at Aunt Olga in the kitchen and called her a glutton so that the Hawk heard it. But to pour water over the directress was probably even worse than stealing apples or calling someone a glutton. He was sure that the Hawk would take him to her room and beat him with a cane.

If she beats me, I'll die, thought Rasmus. I'll die on the spot and that's just as well. After all, he was an orphan with straight hair whom no one wanted, and he might as well be dead.

He was as miserable as ever when he came out in the yard where the others were assembled. Miss Hawk was already there, dressed in a neat black dress and a starched white apron. She clapped her hands and said, "As you've probably heard, we're going to have a visit today from a lady and gentleman who will be here in a while to look you over and have a talk with you. You are to behave as usual. It would be preferable of course if you behaved better than usual. Now, start playing!"

Rasmus didn't want to play. He didn't feel as if he would ever want to play again. Instead he climbed up to his usual perch in the linden tree. There he could be alone to think things out and he could also keep an eye on the road so that he could see the people arriving. Even if he no longer held

any hope that they would choose him, it would still be interesting to see what they looked like.

As he sat there under his green arch, waiting, he took the shell and the five-cent piece out of his pocket and looked at them. It felt good to hold them in his hand. "My treasures," he murmured fondly. "My fine treasures." Despite all his misfortunes, he couldn't help feeling just a little happy about them.

In the distance he heard the faint clatter of horses' hooves. The sound grew louder and soon a coach was visible at the bend of the road. Two brown horses were trotting along briskly in the dust. When the carriage arrived at the gate, the coachman halted them with a loud "Whoa!"

In the coach were a gentleman and a lady, and oh, how beautiful she was! She was wearing a tiny blue hat with white feathers swaying on her blond hair, which was piled up high on the top of her head, and she carried a white lace parasol to protect her from the sun. The parasol was tilted back, so Rasmus was able to see her lovely face. Her cotton dress was also lovely, with its wide, sweeping skirt, and when she got out of the carriage she held it up with her small white hand. Rasmus thought that she looked just like a fairy. The chubby little man who helped her out wasn't at all handsome. He certainly didn't look as if he came out of a fairy tale. But he did have a store filled with candy and licorice sticks, and that made up for a lot.

The lady with the parasol walked with dainty little steps through the gate which her husband held open for her. Rasmus leaned forward as far as he could so that he wouldn't

miss the smallest detail of her fairy-like appearance. How would it feel to have someone like that for a mother?

“Mother,” he said to himself, just to hear how it sounded.

Oh, if this would turn out to be his lucky day after all! Then the beautiful lady would know right away that no one, no one in all of Vaesterhaga, would be a better son than he. As soon as she saw him she would say, “That boy with the straight hair is exactly what I’m looking for.” Then the grocer would nod and say, “Yes, he might be useful around the store. Perhaps he could be in charge of the candy counter.” And when Miss Hawk would come to take him to her room for a beating, the grocer would say, “Please don’t touch our boy.”

Then they would take him along in the carriage and he would hold the pretty lady’s hand. The Hawk would be standing at the gate with her cane, just gaping. As the carriage rolled along the road and the sound of hooves died away, she would cry a little and say, “There goes Rasmus.”

He sighed. If only there weren’t so many girls with curls in the world! Greta and Anna-Stina, and Elna – three of them in this orphanage alone. Elin, too, but she sometimes acted strange, so they probably wouldn’t want her.

Quickly he scrambled down from the tree. The grocer and his wife were already in the yard and any minute they could pick a curly-haired girl. He would at least show himself before then, and then they could blame themselves if they didn’t want him. With determination he strode toward the yard where Miss Hawk had just welcomed the visitors. “Let’s have some coffee in the garden while we’re discussing the situation,” she said, giving them her biggest smile. “You can be looking the children over in the meantime.”

The pretty lady also smiled and looked shyly around the group of children. “Yes, then we can decide. . . .”

Her husband gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Fine,” he said. “Now we’ll have some coffee while we talk.”

The children were playing ball in the playground close by. They had been told to play and that is what they were doing. But it was a chore and no one was enjoying it. How could they play when their whole future depended on how they conducted themselves, and how they happened to look that morning? Many furtive glances were cast in the direction of the three who were sitting at the table by the lilac bush. There was an oppressive silence on the playground. No one quarreled; no one laughed. The only sound that could be heard was the smack of the bat hitting the ball, and it was a strangely painful sound this quiet summer morning.

Like a frightened lamb who has been separated from the flock, Rasmus came running from behind the lilac bush. He had no idea that Miss Hawk and her guests were sitting at the garden table, and when he discovered them it was too late to turn back and go another way. He had to pass directly in front of them, and he did so with a pained expression on his face and walking as if his legs were made of wood. He glanced at Miss Hawk out of the corner of his eye. He was close to her, much too close for comfort, and in his hurry to get away and join the rest of the group he stumbled all over the place. He also glanced at the pretty lady, who just at that moment looked at him. He froze to the spot and just stood there, staring, embarrassed.

“Rasmus—” said Miss Hawk sharply, but she stopped short. After all, these people had come to look at the children.



“Oh, is your name Rasmus?” said the pretty lady. Rasmus was unable to answer. He only nodded.

“How about making a bow when you introduce yourself?”

“Would you like a cookie?” asked the lady, taking one from the basket.

Rasmus blushed and made a hasty bow, at the same time looking in Miss Hawk’s direction. Was he allowed to take the cookie or not?

Miss Hawk nodded and Rasmus accepted it.

“How about saying ‘Thank you’ when someone gives you something?” Miss Hawk said.

Rasmus became still redder. He stood there twisting and turning, not knowing what to do. He didn’t dare eat the cookie and he didn’t know if he was supposed to leave or stay.

“Run along and play now,” said Miss Hawk, and Rasmus turned and abruptly ran as fast as his legs could carry him. Miserable, he sat down on the lawn next to the playground and ate his cookie. He had behaved like a fool, standing there so stupidly and not having the sense to bow and say “Thank you.” Now the lady must think that he was pretty hopeless.

The sun was almost directly overhead now. It was a clear, beautiful summer day and they didn’t have to dig up potatoes. But it was a terrible day of suspense for the children at Vaesterhaga. The ball-playing soon came to an end. No one had the courage even to pretend that it was fun. They didn’t know how to use this unusual free time which had been given to them, and which they knew would last exactly as long as it took those people to make up their minds. Never had a

morning seemed so long. They stood around in small, listless groups, watching the lady with the parasol. Her husband remained at the table reading the paper. It was obviously his wife who was going to make the choice. The lady walked from group to group. She talked with them, embarrassed and a little shy. She didn't exactly know what to say to all these poor creatures who were staring at her so pathetically.

There was that little boy Rasmus. He was staring more intently than the rest and there was a pleading look in his eyes, which were dark and seemed much too big for his narrow, freckled face. But there were others whose eyes also had an imploring look. There was that little chubby girl with the red cheeks and a mop of blond, curly hair falling over her forehead. It was impossible to avoid her because she clung like a burr. She was a bold little thing, the only one of the children who dared to smile back.

The lady stroked her cheek and said encouragingly, "What is your name, little girl?"

"Greta," she said, and made a little curtsy. "What a pretty parasol you have."

The white lace parasol was indeed pretty. The lady gave it a twirl, but as she did so she happened to drop it on the lawn. Before she could bend down to pick it up Greta was there. But not only Greta. Rasmus had been standing close by, as close to the pretty lady as he could get. He pounced on the parasol. At last he would have a chance to show that he too could be polite.

"Let go," cried Greta, tugging at the parasol.

"No, let me," said Rasmus.

“Let go,” cried Greta again, and she gave another tug. Suddenly Rasmus stood there staring dumbfounded at a loose handle in his hand. Greta was holding the rest of the parasol. She was just as horrified. When she finally realized what had happened, she started to cry.

Miss Hawk came running to the scene. “Rasmus, you are impossible,” she said. “I think you’ve gone out of your mind today. Will you ever learn to behave decently?”

Tears of shame and embarrassment came into Rasmus’ eyes and he blushed violently.

The lady stood there, unhappy at seeing so much heart-break. “It’s nothing,” she said kindly. “The handle can be screwed back on. My husband can fix it.”

She took the broken parasol and hurried over to her husband, who was still sitting at the table. Greta quickly dried her tears and trotted behind like a little dog. She stopped a few paces away and watched with interest as the grocer screwed the handle back on the parasol.

“I’m so glad you could fix it,” she said, smiling, her blond curls shimmering in the sun.

But Rasmus had disappeared. He had retreated to the bathroom to hide his shame and his unmanly tears. It was a peaceful place to lick your wounds, and the best place to forget unhappy things. Among the pile of newspapers lying there he could always find something interesting to read, and for the moment he was able to forget all the grocers’ wives and lace parasols in this whole cruel world.

Rasmus sat there deeply engrossed in his reading. He had stumbled on something really exciting. Eagerly, he spelled his way through the article, which read:

## **ROBBERY AT SANDOE FACTORY**

A daring holdup took place yesterday at Sandoe factory. Two masked bandits forced their way into the office and with pointed guns escaped with the week's payroll for the entire factory, without leaving any traces.

Rasmus saw those masked men before his eyes and he shivered with excitement. Just now the pretty lady was far from his mind.

But when the visitors left Vaesterhaga a few hours later, he stood at the gate and stared after the carriage, long after it



was out of sight. In the back seat was Greta, her blond head next to the blue hat with the feathers, and holding the pretty lady securely by the hand.

## CHAPTER 3

# It's All Over Now

“**W**hat did I tell you?” said Gunnar, when the carriage had disappeared. “They always pick girls with curly hair.”

Rasmus nodded. It was true, all right. Boys didn't have a chance if there were girls with curly hair around.

Still, he refused to give up the hope that somewhere in the world there could be someone who would like to have a boy with straight hair. Someone . . . somewhere . . . far beyond that bend in the road.

“You know what we could do?” said Rasmus eagerly. “We could take off and look for parents ourselves.”

“What are you talking about? What parents?” Gunnar didn't follow.

“Parents who would want you. If there was no one else to choose from, they would have to take you, even if you didn't have curly hair.”

“Sure, you ought to go up to Miss Hawk and say, ‘Please excuse me. I can't dig up potatoes today because I'm going out to look for someone who wants me.’ You're crazy.”

“Stupid, we'd take off without asking Miss Hawk, of course.”

